Negotiating With Dragons and Other Ill-Advised Ventures

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Negotiating With Dragons and Other Ill-Advised Ventures

by HigherMagic

Summary

Will is a mage, who works with the FBI to find missing persons and assist with investigations. He's limited by his lack of a familiar, but tries not to let that bother him. During one search, he draws the attention of a great beast, that follows him home. Dragons are a rare sight these days, and not something one should take as a familiar lightly. But when a familiar names themselves as yours, it's not really a matter of choice.

INCOMPLETE AND WILL NOT UPDATE FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE.

Notes

I wrote the first 13k of this during my 20 hour livestream, so it's two chapters so far that I'll add to as I go! I hope you guys like it <3

“We men dream dreams, we work magic, we do good, we do evil. The dragons do not dream. They are dreams. They do not work magic: it is their substance, their being. They do not do; they are.”
― Ursula K. Le Guin, The Farthest Shore

“You have the effrontery to be squeamish, it thought at him. But we were dragons. We were supposed to be cruel, cunning, heartless and terrible. But this much I can tell you, you ape – the great face pressed even closer, so that Wonse was staring into the pitiless depths of his eyes – we never burned and tortured and ripped one another apart and called it morality.”
― Terry Pratchett, Guards! Guards!

Chapter 1

Will doesn't particularly enjoy this kind of work, but it pays the bills and gives him enough money to feed his dogs and justify being on his own. So he does it when Jack asks him to do it.

He frowns down at his desk, rubbing weary hands over his eyes, and sits back with a sigh. Every part of his back is cramped, and his neck feels like it needs to be popped, but the knots are stubborn and refuse to give when he rubs his hands over them.

His fingers are stiff, and he deliberately stretches them out, one by one, like a countdown.

On his desk is a large map of the Battleground State Forest in Minnesota. Bright red pins mark the entrance and exit points of the hiking trails and public areas, and thin golden lines traced into the map show back routes and those paths only known to park rangers and the more nature-savvy. Jack had given him this map when Will requested it, and it has the deadened feel of mortality across it.

Will prefers to make his own maps, but the place is vast, and he doesn't have a lot of time.

He turns his head when he's finished stretching his fingers out and eyes his dogs. They're all dozing comfortably on their nest of beds in front of the fireplace. "Winston," he calls, and the brindle mutt lifts his head, tail wagging once. "I need a boost. C'mere."

Winston yawns at him, and rises, shaking himself off. He trots over and puts his muzzle in Will's hand. Will closes his eyes, concentrating on the dog's slow, even breathing. The gentle *thump-thump* of his heartbeat. Winston is a good dog, drawn to Will's magic just like the rest of them were. So far, of all of them, he's the steadiest source of energy. Will's smaller dogs tire out too easily, and the larger ones are too old to give him as much energy as he needs all the time.

Will draws it in, feeling some of the fatigue fade away as Winston gives him some of his life force. It helps with the headache, at the very least, and calms the stiffness Will has in his fingers. He smiles, opening his eyes, and smooths his thumb between Winston's ears, over his sleek forehead.

"Thank you," he murmurs. Winston yawns again, a little droopy after Will has taken from him, and goes back to recuperate with the rest of the pack, flopping down with a huff.

Will stands again, and puts his hands over the map, on the top left and bottom right corners. He closes his eyes and focuses his energy on the golden lines, the red pins, so extensively studied that they look like the veins in his own eyelids, as well known to him as the lines in his palm.

So far, all the kidnapping victims haven't been recovered. There are no bodies, traces of bodies, anything that comes out of bodies. They've been scouring the nature reserves – Jack is sure it's a hunter that's taking these girls and leaving their corpses deep in the woods where no one will find them.

But there's a live catch, now. The main suspect's own daughter. She's been missing for several days, the wife presumed dead. There was blood in the kitchen, but no firm sign she's been murdered. Will is sure she was.

He grits his teeth, clenching his eyes more tightly shut. He can see the golden routes pulsing behind his eyelids as he tries to fight through the mortal coil and find her, but it's difficult, being so far

away and removed from the main artery of the case.

If he had a real familiar, this would be so much easier. But he doesn't. Most witches and mages Will's age have one, some have two – sibling sets. But Will has never felt a connection with a magical creature, or even a normal one that just happens to be particularly sensitive to magic, and even if he did, he's sure one that would want to serve and help him would be a being too dark for helpful magic like this.

Will is fully aware of himself, almost painfully aware of himself, and knows that if he had something that would help him with his magic, give him the power and strength of a bonded witch, it might not be something he could come back from.

He huffs a breath, turns his head, calls out blindly; "Winston." He hears the dog woof tiredly, but he rises. "Buster. Charlie." The other two join, pushing their muzzles against Will's legs. Will clenches his eyes shut, grits his teeth, drawing from them as best he can. It's more difficult through clothes, but with three of them pushing at him, he's getting enough.

He draws his hands closer together along the map, tracing invisible lines behind his own eyes. There's -. Something….

Technically, Will doesn't help with cases like this. Jack gives him maps and then he receives anonymous tips and ends up finding the missing persons. Will gets a cut of the reward money and a little under the table boost from the FBI BAU petty cash fund, and no one is the wiser. He can only hope neither he nor Jack get audited, because that's going to be a bitch and a half to explain and Will doesn't like using his magic to alter how people think.

He could always disappear, he supposes, but he likes it here. Wolf Trap is wild and full of magic, the kind of place where, in the old days, creatures dwelled. Dragons roamed the mountains and the Fey danced in the woods at night. His own house is on the cross section of two ley lines, and he draws from those as well, clenching his jaw tight enough to hurt as he focuses on the map.

He drags his fingers inward, stuttering as he comes across one line. He knows this area – there are cabins here. He can see them, clear as day, flashing like a projector moving too quickly. Abruptly, Will feels reality fall away as he steps through the land of the living, into the aether.

Well, stepping is not quite right. That implies intent. These days it's more like something grabs him by the wrist and yanks him through before he can even knock. He is drawn by a frantic tug on his magic, as though a child grabbed the hem of his shirt and whispered, "Here, this way."

He hears a soft whisper. It's more like a sensation in his inner ear than an actual sound, and makes the corner of his jaw itch, a shiver running down his spine even though it's neither hot nor cold in the aether. His fingers curl, the mortal aches and pains of his body forgotten as he steps past the boundaries of his house. There are protective barriers around it to stop things getting in, and once he crosses the threshold, there is sensation and sound.

He puts a hand to his mouth, wincing at the pressure on his teeth. His head feels heavy, the weight of eons making him want to bow down and walk on all fours like a beast. He doesn't – Will chooses a human shape in the aether. It's the one he's most comfortable in even though it marks him as Other, and there are creatures capable of moving much more quickly than he is on his two legs.

He tilts his head, as one of the whispers gives way to soft whimpering. It's distorted, the sounds of something young and afraid, but too off-reality for Will to determine true age or gender. Or, even, if

the thing is human. Most noises are like that in the aether, too low or high for his ears to detect, but he is aware of them.

He resists the urge to call out. Mages, travelers, witches – people who can walk into and out of the aether or draw upon its power – draw the attention of things that feed off their energy. He would do well not to bring their attention his way.

He looks around. Trees rise up tall and orange in the non-light of the sun-cat's gaze, blazing down at him from above. He smiles at the cat, and lifts his hand, waving to it in greeting. It winks at him, a wisp of cloud passing across its face.

His hand lowers, and he feels another tug. There's a golden path below his feet, one of the lines of his map. He resists the urge to just blindly follow it, instead listening for more not-sound, any stray stir of leaves or trees. The trees have eyes here.

"Help!" a voice shrieks, loud enough inside his skull to make him flinch. "Help me, please!"

His head snaps to one side at the sound of it, eyes widening. He sees a great shadow moving within the trees, and fear skitters down his spine like anxious insects at the sight of it. He takes a step back, but dares not remove himself from the path.

It is a large black stag, that stares at him from beneath the orange and violet canopy, eyes black. Will exhales slowly. The stag has been his companion on many trips through the aether. Will doesn't know why it follows him to the aether, why it always seems to be where he is, or how. But it always is, and stares at him, and watches him with a protective air. The thick mane of feathers around its neck, down the ridge of its back, and on its tail, glisten as though soaked with oil.

"Hello, friend," he whispers, knowing that if the stag is here, he need not fear another hunter finding him. The stag blusters at him, ears forward. It does not step out into the light of the sun-cat's gaze. It's too bright for the stag to brave it.

The stag's nostrils flare, and Will hears the buzzing beneath his ear, the not-whispers of the aether folk trying to get his attention. Trying to lure him off the path. He looks away, fingers curling. His knuckles feel bruised, somehow, as though he's pushing against something.

The map, he realizes. The desk. He only traveled partway.

He frowns, pressing his lips together, breathing in. The air in the aether is closer to syrup than water, dragging along his throat and heavy behind his heart. He can't breathe it in too deeply or his lungs will seize up. He knows that from experience.

The only weapon he brought to the aether this time is his hands, and he can hear other things moving as the voice calls again. Predators will be drawn to the cry of the prey animal in their midst. He needs to get to them first. He turns and looks back at the stag, finds it watching him with a disinterested air, as though it expects him to simply leave.

He approaches the stag, shuddering as he steps off the path. Then, past it, beneath the cover of the orange and violet tree cover. Woven vines of glistening green, shimmering with hidden flecks of gold, cover the trunks of the trees and the ground like a net. The stag turns to follow him, nose to the ground like a dog, wide horns framing his hands.

"Help me!"

The trees bow and sway, dropping flowers onto his head and shoulders that he pushes off before they can take root and pull him under. He doesn't fault them for wanting his energy – he is a powerful, fresh meal in their world, and they hunger for him as any starving man might eye a steak.

"Help! Please!"

Will blinks, as suddenly in front of him appears one of the cabins. A green vine wraps around his wrist as though to tug him back and he slides it off his wrist, tutting and kicking away its cousin nudging around his ankle. He steps out of the tree line where they, like the stag, cannot chase him. The sun-cat's brilliant eyes blink down at him, bright as two suns.

The cabin is large and looks like something out of a horror movie. The roof is sagging and the gutters bulge with abandoned leaves, and there is rot and mold creeping in down the walls. The porch steps are rotting and broken in the middle, and there is a halo of decay around it that stings Will's nose.

Will frowns. This is not what the cabin should look like. There is no such thing as death and rot in the aether. Everything goes back to the dust. He is seeing something human and real, mortal, like Jack's map. Something that should not be here.

He considers the cabin, uncertainty stalling him in place. A moment later he steels himself and approaches the cabin. As he gets closer, the feeling of darkness and cold overcomes him – odd, in the aether. Impossible. Cold and heat are not something he normally feels.

Evil, his mind whispers to him. There is evil here.

Will steps through the cabin door as though it's no more solid than mist. The inside of the cabin is black, black as the night-cat's face when it sleeps in the sky. Not just the absence of light, but a hungry maw devouring it entirely.

Will's nostrils flare as he breathes in. Scents decay, blood. Evil. Fear.

He blinks, breathes in again, until his lungs are clogged with aether air and his knuckles hurt. He is pushing against the desk, in the real world. He can't make himself open his body's eyes. He's found her, he's sure he has. He just needs to know where 'here' is.

The darkness is so absolute that when the faint glow starts, Will notices it immediately. It comes from the back of the cabin, allowing Will to see the hoards and hoards or antlers between him and the back, stacked upon each other like ladders and broken firewood all put together for kindling. They appear to him like bars of a cage, a thick bramble bush, spikes jutting out every which way and stopping him from getting closer.

He crouches down, trying to see the source of the light better. In the distance, he sees it; a trembling coil of white light, like a spring. A soul, too young and untried to give itself a shape in the aether. Will swallows, searching for anything he might use to get its attention without giving his presence away. The stench of malice here is like molasses.

Near Will, a door opens. He flinches from the light with a quiet snarl, weaving his way between the antlers. He doesn't like to change his shape in the aether, but he has to in order to stay out of sight. Another echo of light enters, darker but still on the same spectrum as the little one. Will crawls after it, as the antlers part.

He is certain that this coil is what he's searching for. He is *almost* certain that the grey shade is the missing girl's father. Will circles the two of them, and the fact that they will not change shape merely confirms what he has already begun to suspect:

Somehow, Abigail Hobbs' father managed to cross into the aether, and hide her. That's why no one can find either of them, and it's likely what he did to the other girls' bodies as well to avoid detection.

Will wants to snarl at him. Even if that wasn't a monumentally stupid thing to do, it makes his job a Hell of a lot harder. Without knowing how Hobbs did this, it's less of a search and more creating an antidote to a new poison. He needs to counter synthesize it and he can't do that without knowing how Hobbs brought the whole cabin here.

And, of course, the idea itself is ridiculous and idiotic and anyone who knew anything about the aether would know that. Traveling like this, moving mortal elements into the aether, unguarded, is asking for trouble. It's amazing to Will that nothing has come to eat this place alive yet.

He paces around the pair of them, until finally, he must relent and admit that he doesn't have time to simply wait for them to manifest, nor can he question mere light as to their whereabouts. This is going to take more effort, more power, than he has.

Will hates admitting defeat, but he's not going to risk himself, or his dogs, or his hearth for the sake of one girl. He can feel them weakening, no longer pressing quite so readily against his legs to give him their energy. He can feel his physical body sagging, trying to keep himself upright on his locked arms.

He rubs a hand over his face, and prowls out of the cabin, away from the lights. As soon as he leaves the cabin, that distorted scream rings out, loud enough that even the trees quiver and the stag grunts and blusters in warning. Will looks up, and winces as the sun-cat blinks, thrusting him into darkness. The scream comes from behind him, from inside the cabin. Things are going to hear the screams. Will has to get out of here before the hungry ones show up.

He hurries from the cabin and into the trees, the stag following behind him as the trees quiver and the vines reach, thorny and clawing. Will hisses as one wraps around his wrist and yanks hard enough to draw blood.

"Damn it," he grunts, wrapping his wrist up in his other fingers, blood welling up cool and thick – not warm, not in the aether – between them, staining his knuckles. He must be careful not to let any fall on the ground. Flowers will grow, and lead the monsters back home.

The stag follows him until he finds the golden path again. He sighs, knowing he'll be safe with the mortal connection to the map blinding monsters to his presence. The stag leaves him there, turning away, as though it has another stop to make on its never-ending course of guarding Will in the aether.

Will watches it go, and then he whistles sharply. It stops, and turns to look at him. Will offers his hand. The stag snorts, ears forward, then back, then one facing each way. Will looks up, to find the sun-cat's eyes closed, dozing behind the cover of clouds.

"Quickly," he murmurs.

The stag comes forward, mindful of the sunlight, and wary of the golden path. Will cups his bloody hand under the stag's muzzle and lets it lick, gives it some of his power as thanks for guarding him and leading him home.

The animal snorts again, and leaves, right as the sun-cat opens its eyes. Will squints, and turns away, following the path. He knows, eventually, it will lead him home.

Will comes to bowed over the map, and sucks in a breath like he has just spent minutes underwater, lungs fighting the burn and suffocating under the pressure of an ocean. He tips his head back and breathes out, closing his eyes and re-centering his teeth, the angle of his jaw.

He puts the saddle of his thumb under his chin and slowly twists his head to one side until his neck pops, and exhales again. Charlie and Buster, as the respectively older and smaller of the three, tremble with exhaustion by his sides, only their muzzles on his bare feet, soft whiskers tickling his ankle. Winston is still standing, but just barely.

Will touches their heads, sinking to his knees. "Good," he murmurs. "Good boys. Thank you." Charlie huffs tiredly, his big head heavy in Will's hands. Will forces himself to his feet and to the kitchen, separating an extra serving of food for the three he called for energy during his search.

He lets the rest of them out so Winston, Buster, and Charlie can eat in peace, and looks down at his hands, hissing in pain as he flexes his fingers. There's blood around his wrist from the vine, and he growls to himself, aggravated at getting injured. Thankfully, no trail was left to follow him home, and within his boundary he is safe from being scented, but it's stupid shit like that that means predators will be drawn to the area should he need to return again.

He goes back to the map. His eyes gravitate, pulled by instinct, to one square of the grid, towards the bottom right corner. Some of his blood has spilled on it, in two little drips. One of them is at the entrance to a ranger's path. The other is in the middle of a patch of green, off the beaten path.

Will presses his lips together, breathing in. He could call Jack now, and tell him to search those areas, but after seeing the cabin, he knows that there isn't going to be anything to find. Nothing Jack can see, anyway. If Will could get in contact with another witch, maybe they could help him throw Hobbs out of the aether and back into a place he could get arrested and taken into custody, his daughter rescued.

But if Hobbs managed to travel, that means he can do it again. Will is going to need to bind him to the mortal coil before he can get him arrested, and that is simply beyond his power without a familiar.

Will sighs, rubbing his clean hand over his face. Traveling to the aether always makes him feel sticky, and dusty, like he ran through a desert and then the ocean and then a desert again. He makes sure Winston, Charlie, and Buster eat their food before he calls the rest of the dogs back in and then goes upstairs to shower and ground himself.

Water is grounding. Running water is the best, that's why Will makes sure to regularly go out and fish, to wash off the cling of magic that isn't his own. Another thing that would be easier with a

familiar – not just something that can give him additional energy to use, but an open vessel for him to scrape the excess off, that is much more capable of digesting it.

He sighs, exhausted, and scrubs himself clean until his skin turns pink and he doesn't feel like he'll vibrate out of it again. He steps out, toweling himself dry and throwing it in the hamper, crossing to the bedroom he doesn't use as a bedroom to change into a fresh set of clothes.

He's nursing a cup of coffee and staring out to the trees when Jack calls him. Will used to prefer the aether's flora to that of the real world. It's so much more vibrant, more colorful, more alive. Perma-autumn and luminescence under the night-cat's watching eye. But now he's not sure. There's something lush and forgiving about mortality, something he appreciates more for its impermanence.

He reaches into his pocket and answers the phone without looking. "Yeah?"

"Anything?" Jack's voice is clipped and gruff in that kind of way men are when they like you but think you're very, very strange. Will's worked for him long enough for Jack to tolerate most of his idiosyncrasies, and Will's adopted mannerisms make up for the rest, but Jack is still of the living world, the mortal world, and all mortal things tremble in the face of death.

Will hums, and slurps noisily at the dregs of his coffee. His breath mists on his exhale, clouding his vision. "Narrowed it down," he replies. "But I can't confirm yet."

Jack pauses. He knows, or perhaps he hears, the catch in Will's voice. The hesitation. This is abnormal. Will has never needed to venture into the aether twice for one search. "What happened?" Jack asks. He asks like doubting Thomas might have asked Jesus what the other side was like. He doesn't want to know but can't rest until he does.

"Hobbs traveled," Will tells him, setting his mug down. Winston sniffs at it curiously before nudging his way beneath one of Will's legs, and curling up around his feet. Will's feet are still bare. He doesn't feel the cold like normal people do. "He got Abigail in the aether. Probably where he took the other girls too."

Jack pauses, for a long time. It takes Will a minute to realize he's expecting Will to say something. To explain how to get around it.

Will sinks his teeth into the inside of his lower lip and tilts his head back. "I'm not going to be able to help," he says.

Jack makes a gruff sound. "Why not?"

"Because it's -." Complicated. Not that simple. Impossible for a mage lacking the power it would take for something like that. To find, crack, and reverse another traveler's method is like starting with a new element and trying to figure out how to test its existence. A guy with a rattlesnake bite seeking a doctor, but it's a brand-new species.

"You'll need someone stronger than me," Will says instead. "Someone with a familiar, at least. Maybe even two. I can ask around."

He can *hear* Jack frowning. "I don’t need more people involved with this, Will," he says. "If you need a…familiar, or whatever, then -."

"It's not as simple as renting one," Will snaps, because he knows that's what Jack's going to suggest. "I'm not being difficult on purpose, Jack. I genuinely can't help you with this one. I'm not strong enough and I'm going to need to pass this one on. I'm sorry."

Jack pauses again, and then he sighs. "Alright," he replies. "How long do you think it'll be? I'm getting a lot of pressure from upstairs about this."

Will doesn't particularly care about that, and he cares even less because he knows Jack is only mentioning it to tug at a feeling of guilt Will doesn't possess. He looks down at his bandaged wrist and wonders if the vine that bit him is big and strong now. If it grew flowers.

"Let me make some calls," he replies. "I'll let you know."

"Thank you, Will. Good luck."

It's not a question of luck. Will hangs up without saying so. He considers the tree line, lips pressed together, Winston panting against his calf muscle. He curls his toes in the dog's soft hide and feels him huff in answer.

Will doesn't have that many friends, and even fewer people he'd trust to be discreet with a traveler's job. He'd have to teach them his method, which is a closely guarded secret amongst all those able to do it. Not everyone can, and for those who can't, the aether is like the lost city of gold. They think there is power there, things to harvest and hunt for their spells.

And they're not wrong, but that doesn't mean everyone should get a turn.

Will sighs, breath misting again, and scratches at the stubble on his face. His wrist itches as well, and he resists the urge to rub at it, to peel back the skin and make sure there's no thorns or sap trapped beneath or woven into the flesh.

Winston would smell it on him if there was.

After a while, Will has to concede that there's really only one person he would trust with his traveling method. And if she decides to screw him over, well, Will knows her boss in the real world.

"Graham," she chirps, stretching his name out for several seconds. "What's on fire now?"

"You assume something's on fire, Bev?" Will asks, smiling.

"Either someone's dying or something's on fire with you," Beverly replies. "Sometimes both, which is impressive. What's up?"

"I need help with something."

She hums, and in the background, Will hears something knocking over, an aggravated chittering. "Jimmy, Brian, I swear to God, calm down!" Will clears his throat so he doesn't laugh, and Beverly sighs. "I'm at the lab. You wanna come in or?"

"I'd prefer if you come here, if you don't mind," Will replies. "It's…complicated."

Her silence is short, but loaded. "Do I need to bring Jimmy and Brian?"

"Please."

"Alright. I'll be by around seven. Make sure you've got decent shit, not that crap you drink."

Will laughs. "Sure," he murmurs, his eyes gravitating back to the tree line. "See you then."

Will has known Beverly for a long time, since before he unofficially started working for Jack. Almost since he began lecturing on magical signs and influences on murder scenes and what to look for when mortals come on a scene that they suspect has magic involved. The real title is exceedingly long and very ridiculous as most things related to magic are, but it attracts a lot of big names and big egos.

Beverly had shown up after one particularly grating lecture that left Will with a bad taste in his mouth and a pounding in the base of his skull that he couldn't get rid of. Will knows her magic leans more towards necromancy and decay – she works in forensics and can analyze a body with her magic with pinpoint accuracy – but she's got a healer's touch, because only a few minutes later Will had managed to smile, and his headache had faded to almost nothing.

Beverly has two familiars – Jimmy and Brian, who work with her in the lab. They're more energetic than Will would prefer in a familiar, but Beverly manages them easily and they adore her, that much is easy to see even if Will weren't good at noticing things like that.

He's got some time to kill. It's easiest to travel to and from the aether at dawn, dusk, or the witching hour when the veil is thin, so it's still early morning and with the empty day ahead of him, Will takes his time watching the sky brighten to blue.

He cannot nor should he go back to the aether today, not until Beverly is here at least. That's just asking for trouble. There are some things to do around the house, he supposes, but he's tired and not in a mood to be productive. Besides, the sight of the map still on his desk will aggravate him, a reminder of his own impotence.

He sighs, and pushes himself to his feet, disturbing Winston. The dog looks up at him, offended, and follows Will inside when Will clicks his tongue. Will pulls on his boots and his jacket and leaves the house again, trudging through the mud and melting snow in his field, towards the trees, which hides the river.

He hears soft panting behind him, and looks over his shoulder to see Winston leading the charge as his pack follow him. He smiles, and pets Charlie's head when he butts it against Will's hand. They're good dogs, he knows they are. He just wishes they were enough. He can feel his own potential, always has, since he was a boy, and he knows he could be *so* capable and do so *much.* Terrible, awful things, if he wanted to. The kinds of things that mortal beasts can't help him with. He would never take so much energy that he harmed his animals, and therefore, hobbles and muzzles himself.

The river is calm and quiet when Will gets to it. The day promises to be relatively warm, and he sheds his coat and hangs it on a tree branch, and sits on the side of the river. The bank is silty and wet and soaks through his jeans immediately, chilly and uncomfortable, but it's a reminder that he's not in the aether, and that's reassuring.

He looks down at his injured wrist and carefully peels back the bandage, revealing the small coil of cuts left by the vine and its thorns. They're shallow, but there are many of them, a series of clotted spikes like an inverted cactus. Will sighs.

A sudden lack of movement calls his attention. Will looks up, and finds that every one of his dogs have stopped in place, their eyes fixed and ears forward, looking at the other side of the river, where the trees grow thick and Will can only see shadows.

There's a buzzing, suddenly, in the hollow of his ear. A not-sound like a snarl slightly too low to be audible. It makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He rises to his feet and steps back from the river, his dogs remaining motionless around him.

Another vibration, ringing his inner ear, makes his jaw clench, wincing. He takes another step back and snaps his fingers, calling at least Buster's attention. He trots over and seems to guard Will as the rest of his dogs slowly start moving back, following him from the riverbank and through the trees. Will keeps his eyes on the other side; he knows anything that causes a reaction in all of them like that, that vibrates against his skull, is not something he should meet out in the open, weaponless.

He looks down at his wrist, and curses to himself. It was foolish to unwrap it and put the scent of his blood beyond the boundary surrounding his house. But it's been so long since anything was powerful enough to travel the aether, and brave enough to encroach upon his territory….

Whatever it is that followed him home, it's powerful and daring.

The trees don't move as Will emerges from them, walking backwards. He forces his pace even and his heart steady, counting on his dogs to alert him to anything he can't perceive. Buster circles his feet like an orbiting moon and Winston herds the pack behind him, putting himself closest to the perceived source of the danger.

Another rumble comes, this one shaking the ground beneath Will's feet. It comes as soon as Will crosses the boundary into his house, and sounds frustrated. Distorted, as most aether-dwellers are to Will's too-mortal ear, but ultimately not human.

As soon as Will and the dogs are inside, he bolts the door and presses his hand to it, closing his eyes as he checks the wards and sigils carved into the floorboards and the loadbearing wall separating the living room and the kitchen.

They're all intact, but all it would take is one good quake to make something crack, and if the creature can make the ground tremble just by *growling*, well.

Will exhales, clenching his fists, and steps back from the door. Clearly, whatever it is, followed him from the aether. Which means Will has to lure it back. If he does that, at least his home and the dogs will be okay, and then he can either lure it far enough away that it'll lose the scent, or he can kill it.

He can try to kill it.

Will doesn't like taking weapons to the aether. It's like walking into a roomful of dynamite with a lit match. But this thing came for him first, so fair's fair. Will leaves the living room and heads back upstairs, to a trunk that used to belong to his father and help keepsakes from his days in the military. Now those things are buried with him.

Will opens the trunk and takes, first, the leather bag attached to a string holding his collection of semiprecious stones, salt, and other shiny baubles the friendly folk like and he can trade for information or guidance. If he gets lost, it is those folk he will need help from to lead him back home.

People think that there has to be a lot of fancy tools and special equipment to deal with the Fey, and those that dwell in the aether. It's not true. One must simply know where to look, know how to act, and not do anything stupid.

Will has crystals, and boxes of table salt in the trunk as well. He uses those more in the mortal world than the aether, and doubts either of them will be useful here, but he pulls a box of salt out anyway in case he needs a distraction, shoving it into the inner pocket of his coat.

Beneath the first layer of the trunk, containing his smaller items, which he lifts and sets to one side, are his weapons.

Will has three weapons, in total. One is a simple iron poker, because there's something to be said for having a piece of iron you can just swing, and it'll burn most Fey on contact. And it has the bonus of having a pointy end.

The second is a gun. It was his father's, a heavy .45 revolver that Will has never had to use, thankfully. Will cuts sigils into the bullets and he had the pearl handle engraved with a spell for protection, but that's more force of habit than anything else. Guns are too loud, especially in the aether, and the weapon only holds six rounds, so he's never considered it.

He doesn't now. Something this powerful needs his staff.

He hasn't had to use the thing in years – it's an old, outdated practice to use a staff, and they were usually solely for warfare or aggressive magic, which Will…tries to avoid. He tries very hard to avoid it. Still, it's the best he has, and he wraps his fingers around it, pulling it out of the trunk with a soft huff. It's heavier than he remembers, made of pure metal with a warped head in the shape of a dragon's roaring mouth, a single, large clear gem held snug between its fangs.

Will tenses as he feels the floor tremble again, the snarl loud enough to shake dust loose from the rafters of the house. The dogs are whining downstairs. Will exhales heavily, and leaves the room, bag around his neck, salt weighing his pocket down, and staff in hand.

He doesn't walk into the aether, outside his house, so much as throw himself into it, even before the familiar sensation of grabbing hands can pull him in. Immediately, he knows it was a stupid thing to do; he's far too weak and in no state to fight whatever might have followed him into the real world, but if it gets him away from his house, maybe he can at least run.

He didn't return to the aether version of Battleground State Forest, this time. On the East Coast, where the aether covers his house like a blanket, the trees are black and blue like bruises, purple leaves rustling with a constant breeze. The ground behaves like sand; one will sink if in one place for too long. The sun-cat is still awake, gazing down at him curiously, as if to ask him what he's doing back here.

Will presses his lips together and reaches into his coat pocket, opens the box, and grabs a handful of salt. He lets it trickle from his hand as he walks towards the trees, away from his house. The beast, whatever it is, will follow him here, he's sure, if he's its true target. If it is one of the Fey, the salt will distract it, and give Will time to observe and strike.

If it's not, well.

He reaches the tree line and turns, and crouches on his heels. He lays his staff down within reach and pours more salt around him in a thick ring, so that nothing can wander across and try to take a bite out of him.

The trees in Wolf Trap are either more kindhearted or they like him, and they are well-fed enough on his magic so that they don't try to take more, for no creeping vines or wilting flowers trying to weave themselves into his bones or settle in his hair.

Will waits, hidden behind a thick crowd of brambles and thorns the color of rare meat. He holds his breath and remains utterly still, fighting past the way his heart starts to beat loud and his lungs burn for air. He doesn't need to breathe in the aether, and he can't afford to listen.

His fingers brush along the ground. It trembles, deeper than surface level fear. The core of the earth is shaking as the beast approaches, drawn by the scent of Will's blood, his open wounds. He wonders if he would have made it this far if the vine had bitten him deeper. If there would be more coming, or if this monster slaughtered them all.

A single step.

Then another.

A low snarl, that feels like it begins in his own skull and rumbles down his spine. It makes his bones ache, his held breath fight to escape. Will curls his nails into the sandy ground and feels it shift around him, feels himself start to sink.

The field in which his house normally sits is still, as though there's a wall of illusion in front of him, telling Will that the earth is shaking and he's sinking, and the wind is so strong. But it's not. It could be a trick to lure him out of the cover of the trees and into the open.

And yet, the sand rises around his knees. Encases his ankles. He feels the pressure of them, bidding him move. The sand doesn't swallow the salt, but Will can't break the ring, otherwise he'll be vulnerable.

Above him, the sun-cat closes its eyes, and the world is thrust into darkness.

It is from that darkness that the beast emerges.

Will sees it as merely shapes and shades of color, deep purples, and greens like an oil spill. For a moment, he thinks it bears a striking resemblance to the stag. But then the beast rears its large, regal head, and bares teeth that shine like things that glow at the bottom of the sea. The blue of them is beautiful, the sharpness of its teeth doing nothing to temper that beauty.

The beast's eyes shine as well, no pupil, nothing but the vaguely angled shape of a reptile. It snarls, and arcs its head, the glow of its eyes and its teeth mirrored in a set of long, wickedly curved claws. It looks like it tears itself out of the very ground, and Will's eyes widen. He can't help staring, as sand rises up around him, and he makes no move to reach for his weapon or pull himself out of the ground.

Another snarl settles at the base of his skull, making him shiver. Then, the sun-cat opens its eyes, and Will sees the beast in daylight.

It's a dragon. Will hasn't even *heard* of one in the States for years, let alone seen one up close. He had imagined they'd retreated to places where humans would leave them alone, tired of being hunted for their magical skill or power, or slaughtered for pieces of their body to use in spells.

In the daylight, the dragon is the same black color as the space between stars. Its eyes and teeth and claws no longer shine, merely hold an unnatural whiteness like bleached bone. Will watches it dig itself up out of the sand, shaking itself free like a dog. Its wings spread out, casting long shadows beneath the sun-cat's watching eye, the membranes of them like a very dark iron ore. Its tail is long and has a flare of feathery membranes surrounding the tip, the same ridge that follows the arch of its spine to the base of its skull. Two long white horns jut from its head, backward-facing and straight, and smaller ones frame its face, combined with additional membranes to give a vaguely lion-like mane.

It has two legs, and a set of claws at the arch of its wing, which is uses as forelegs, falling forward as it snarls and fights it way free of the grip of the sand in the middle of the field. Will watches, as it spreads its wings, parts its jaws, and sniffs the air, with ragged breaths.

It snarls again, twisting around. The wind is confusing it, Will realizes. It can't tell where Will's scent is coming from.

Will looks up. There are clouds approaching – the sun-cat will close its eyes soon, and he can escape in the darkness.

The sand is almost at his hips now, and he grits his teeth, reaching up to grab a hold of a branch and haul himself out of the mire as quietly as he can. He keeps his eyes on the dragon as he crawls his way out, over the ring of salt – now that he knows what's chasing him, he knows that salt's not going to do shit.

He grabs his staff and pulls it towards him, moving back as quietly as he's able. The dragon's tongue snakes out between its teeth, its nostrils flaring wide as it snarls. The sound is so low and powerful it rings in Will's ears and makes his teeth feel like they're vibrating.

Darkness falls as the sun-cat blinks, revealing the dragon's glowing eyes, teeth, and claws, and its glistening wing membranes and horns, the membranes down its back and around its tail shining like moonlight on water. It snarls, tasting the air again, and turns, circling in Will's direction, searching.

Will pauses. Stares.

Frowns.

He creeps forward again, low to the ground, and presses his lips together as the dragon continues to look for him. It's panting, obviously tired and trying to catch its breath. Will is sure he saw -.

He swallows, and pushes his thumb into the jaws of the dragonhead on his staff, behind the jewel. He whispers a soft incantation to get the dragon to release the gem into his hand, and sets the staff down. In the field, the dragon twitches and snakes its tongue out again, eyes narrowed.

Will holds his gem in his hands, and then lowers it into the salt ring, until it gains a thin crust on one edge. He smears the salt across it and cakes some under his nail, so that he can rut the fine salt dust into the surface of the gem and carve his sigil.

When he looks up, the dragon has begun to settle. If what Will thinks he saw is right, it will soon be obvious why.

He plants the gem in the ground and lowers himself to it, pushes the brambles giving him cover to one side so that he still has a clear view of the beast, and whispers into the ground, "Show me."

The gem flickers, like a pool of disturbed water. Will closes his eyes, and then opens them, blinking slowly as the gem begins to shift, and it is though he is standing right in front of the beast, and can get a better look through the eye of the earth, and the trees, who have much better vision than him.

The dragon snarls, wings flexing like it knows it is being watched. Its nostrils flare again, and it parts its jaws, saliva dripping from them and steaming on the ground. Warm, but not hot enough to start a fire. It's not igniting it.

As Will angles the gem and moves the point of focus down, he can see why.

Dragons haven't been seen for so many years, and any studies conducted on them tend to be in the back of old libraries covered in dust. But Will used to spend a lot of his time there, since no one would bother him back in the outdated sections of the libraries and deep in the abandoned mines of archaic knowledge.

So he knows, when he looks down at the center of the beast's chest, where the powerful muscles give way to its wings and at the base of where its neck begins, there should be a stone. Will frowns, wondering if it's simply too dark to see, but no, he was certain that -.

The sun-cat opens its eyes again, sending brilliant light down upon the beast and making Will wince, hissing in discomfort. The hollow in the center of the dragon's chest is visible, then. There are tiny pieces of what looks like what should be a luminescent stone, the same quality as its claws and teeth, but there is nothing.

Will isn't quite sure what emotion floods his chest when he realizes that the dragon's stone is damaged. Or, perhaps, has been ripped from its chest. It's uncomfortable, as though feeling the wound himself once he sees it. He rises to his knees and rubs at his sternum as he waves his hand and dims the gem. He feels…almost sad, close to sad, seeing a powerful beast missing such an intrinsic part of itself.

It takes him a minute, when he looks up and sees the dragon, muzzle wrinkled and pale eyes narrowed, before he realizes that the most powerful emotion is rage.

Someone stole this dragon's fire stone. The very thing that gives it power to set the world aflame. No wonder it is so hungry for blood – only a powerful mage could have done such a thing. Will would be consumed with the need for vengeance too if someone had done that to him.

Of course, that doesn't mean he wants the dragon to know he's here. Damaged or not, it's still a powerful and large beast and could easily kill him with a single snap of its jaws or swipe of its claws. Will carefully sets the gem back in the mouth of his staff, and crawls backwards until he's clear enough of the brambles to get to his knees, then his feet.

He holds his breath and carefully watches the sand and fallen leaves and twigs below his feet, not wanting to step on one and give away his location. In keeping such focus on the ground, he doesn't notice the wind calming, and going still.

The dragon snarls, so loudly it feels like it's right in his ear. Will looks up and curses as the beast's head snaps towards him, no longer confused by the constant shifting breezes that put Will's scent everywhere and nowhere.

It turns, tail whipping up a wave of sand, and flares its wings. It lunges, and crashes into the first row of trees with such force that the strong trunks simply snap in two, falling under the dragon's weight.

Absently, Will considers he probably would have been better off bringing his gun.

There's certainly no outrunning a Goddamn dragon, so Will doesn't try. He backs away slowly, keeping as much distance between them as he can as the dragon snarls and tears at the bruised canopy of leaves, shoving branches out of the way. It bares its teeth and Will can see the way it's trying to ignite its own air, and breathe fire on him.

It can't. Will's eyes drop to the open cavity in its chest, the flesh between its delicate black scales reddened and sore-looking. The wound is fresh, he realizes. Pity and anger coil around his spine as well as the very real fear for his life.

Once Will is sure any wayward blast of magic won't affect anything close by too badly, he stops retreating. He hasn't had to fight with his magic, but he knows the spells. He knows how to focus his energy, and there's something to be said for beginner's luck. He hopes.

The beast snarls at him, muzzle wrinkled as it prowls closer. It's breathing hard, it probably can't breathe without hurting. Will raises his staff, the gem glowing a dark red like old blood. The dragon blinks at it, almost grimacing, its tail snapping behind it in aggravation at the threat.

"I have no fight with you," Will says. The dragon hisses at him, a rough chitter in the back of its throat as, again, it tries to breathe fire down on Will. "Leave."

He didn't really expect the dragon to just accept that. Dragons aren't known for their reasonable natures, or for being pushovers. And Will is sure that, to this beast, he's little more than an irritating fly.

And so, when the beast merely growls and lunges, Will is ready for it. He grits his teeth and ducks under the dragon's head as it snaps at the air Will was just occupying, plants the gem under the dragon's throat and sends a pulse of magic like an electric shock down its neck. It shrieks in pain, jerking away, and swipes at Will with one of its wings. He can't duck that, so he braces himself behind his staff and lets that take the brunt of the hit, skidding across the sand-like ground until his shoulder collides with one of the trees hard enough he hears something snap.

Will groans in pain, and shoves himself upright. He can't lift his arm more than a few inches before pain shoots across his shoulders and into his skull. Something's likely broken if not cracked. He exhales heavily and doesn't spare himself anything to heal. He's already cutting it close, fighting a Goddamn dragon on a return trip to the aether in the same day.

If he survives, when Bev hears about this, she's going to kill him.

The dragon snarls at him, slithering closer, sensing weakness. Will grits his teeth and glares at the beast, shying back as the dragon's tongue slithers out to taste the air again. Whether it's just hungry or for some reason it has a beef with Will, it lets out a snarl that sounds satisfied, like Will is exactly what it was looking for.

The dragon's jaws part, its fangs so white Will can almost see himself in them. He shudders, and grips his staff with his good hand. This is either going to kill him or create a crater so fucking wide it's not going to matter.

The dragon lunges for him again and Will catches its muzzle with his injured hand, jaw clenched as he shoves it to one side so that the dragon's teeth sink into his shoulder and flank, clamping down. His body is big enough that the beast can't bite all the way through, so he shoves the head of his staff between its jaws, right into the back of its throat, until he feels the give of muscle that loosens when a dragon breathes fire, combining gas with sparks from the fire stone.

The dragon snarls at him, and Will bares his teeth in a smile of his own. Bev always did say he had a habit of starting fires.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will wakes up sore and in pain and around thirty percent certain he's not dead. He's pretty sure the afterlife wouldn't hurt this much, and that it wouldn't be this loud. He groans, his good arm lifting to his face while his injured shoulder throbs, and feels about as structurally sound as Play-Doh, and then there's his stomach and his forehead and -.

"Don't move." That's Beverly's voice. So Will is a little more confident he's not dead. Although Beverly speaks to the dead, so for all he knows she's Ouija-ing him to…undeath. But he can also feel, along with her hand tugging his hand away from his face, little brushes of fur against his shoulder and over his stomach, so that's probably Jimmy and Brian, who are not capable of crossing to the other side with her.

So he's probably alive.

Great.

Will cracks his eyes open and finds himself in his house, staring at the familiar white ceiling with little imperfections of plaster and that small stain of water damage he fixed the source of but never painted or papered over.

He turns his head when there's a pinch at his elbow, and he hisses, glaring down to see Beverly pushing at the vein in his inner elbow to get it to swell under the tourniquet and sticking a needle into him. The needle is attached to a bag hanging from a metal bar above his head that he doesn't own.

"Did you bring the lab with you?" he gripes.

Beverly looks up, meets his eyes, and fixes him with a look that tells Will, in no uncertain terms, that he needs to watch his damn mouth. "I figured there might be some need for medical attention," she replies coolly, "give than you almost leveled the entirety of Northern Virginia into the fucking ocean."

Will blinks at her, frowning. "What?"

"That was you, wasn't it? There was a -. Well, we're calling it an earthquake, but you and I both know what it was." She narrows her eyes. "Scared the shit outta me, and that's nothing for the coven down in Richmond."

"Richmond," Will repeats. "It reached Richmond?"

"*Yes*, Will! You're lucky it was just aether-deep." Beverly shakes her head again and unwinds the elastic from Will's arm, and takes the squeezy ball she'd forced into his hand. He flexes his fingers and winces at the feeling of icy fluid running into his veins. It's probably some kind of healing potion Beverly makes, and even as he lies there, he can feel the aches in his stomach and shoulder fade slightly.

He frowns. He remembers hurting his shoulder against the tree, and his stomach -.

He sits up, dislodging Jimmy, who had been purring against Will's bandaged stomach. Will hisses as the grey cat blinks up at him and slides off, his silky fur ruffling up until Beverly catches him as he leaps off the bed, and casually pushes him up so he can perch on her shoulders. Will looks down at his stomach, pressing his hand gingerly against the bandages.

"What the fuck happened, Will?" Beverly whispers. Brian, her other cat, a black and white tuxedo mix that is the same size as Jimmy but far sleeker, making him appear smaller, prowls around Will's shoulders and back as though checking him. And, deeming him fit enough for the difficult task of sitting upright, slinks away and settles on a chair behind Beverly. Will's dogs know better than to bother a witch's familiars.

Will closes his eyes, sending his own magic into his body. He doesn't do anything to disrupt Beverly's stitching or healing, merely observes and takes stock. "There was a dragon," he murmurs. He can feel the row of sharp cuts along his stomach, curved up like a smile, mimicking how the dragon bit him. So, too, are their wounds around his injured shoulder, and down his spine, like he was going to be bitten in half.

The shoulder itself is bruised, a fissure chipped into the blade, but healing happily along with the rest. Even Will's wrist isn't showing injury anymore.

He looks up and meets Beverly's wide eyes. "A dragon," she repeats.

Will nods. "It…. It caught my scent. Followed me out from the aether. So I lured it back, and we fought, and I -."

"Blasted it sky-high." Beverly's voice is softer, now, with understanding. She looks away as Jimmy rubs his forehead against her hair. "What the fuck was a dragon doing here?"

"I don't know," Will replies. "But it must have followed me from Minnesota – that's where I was, in the aether, before." Beverly's brow creases and she folds her arms across her chest. "Got bit by a creeper vine, so it's got my scent." He pauses. "*Had* my scent."

"You think you killed it?" Beverly asks.

"I have no idea," Will replies. "But if I hadn't, I don't think I'd be here."

Beverly makes a vague sound of agreement. Then; "We should send a hunter after it." Will looks at her, arching a brow. "Dragons don't just show up, Will. If one of them's after you, then we need to make sure it's dead."

Will presses his lips together, looking away. "Right," he murmurs. His fingers curl against his bandages, and he sighs. "I don't know any hunters."

Beverly hums. "I'll figure it out," she says. Jimmy jumps down as she steps forward and pats his good shoulder. "You need to get some rest. Let the bag empty and then drink a bunch of water and you'll be all set."

Will laughs. "You get any better and you'll be bringing people back from the dead."

"I call this the Graham dose," she says with a wink, making him laugh again. It's a good potion because laughing doesn't even hurt, and it definitely should. Will lies back as Jimmy and Brian help Beverly collect all her tools and drop them delicately in her bag, whiskers and tails twitching as they search around to make sure they didn't leave anything behind.

Will closes his eyes, sighing again.

"Hey, Will?"

"Mm?"

"Maybe next time a fucking dragon attacks you, call someone instead of trying to nuke it by yourself, alright?"

Will cracks a smile. "No promises."

She huffs, and opens the door. "I left some pick-me-ups in your fridge, too," she tells him, ushering Jimmy and Brian out with her foot.

Will frowns. "I needed your help with something," he says.

"Yeah, that can wait. You almost died, dumbass, give it a minute." He smiles at her tone, which is more aggravated than genuinely worried. People like Will don't just die without at least a little flair. Fighting a dragon certainly counts.

"I'll call you later," he says.

"You'd better." And then the door closes, and Will is left alone with the whir of the air conditioning and the quiet panting of all of his dogs. He forces his eyes open and stares back up at the ceiling, his hand resting on his bandaged stomach.

A fucking dragon. Not only that, but an injured one. Dragons use their fire stone for so much; not just creating flame, but to regulate their body temperature, to keep them warm enough to make them buoyant enough to fly. Without its stone the beast might be unable to do anything of the sort.

"That's why it crawled through the ground," Will tells the ceiling, and the dogs, and no one in particular. His fingers curl as, again, pity and rage well up in his chest. Now that he's not actively fearing for his life, he can feel those other things much more acutely. He'd be pissed too, if someone took away a literal part of him, something he *needed* to survive. If he lost his magic, he doesn't know what he'd do.

Beverly's potion is doing wonders, and soon Will feels well enough to sit up, and then stand. He drags the metal bar with him so that the rest of the potion can enter his body, and his dogs rise with him, tails wagging as he lets them outside. Winston nudges his hand until Will pets him, smiling weakly.

"I'm alright, buddy," he murmurs, and gestures outside. "Go on."

Winston licks his muzzle, and obeys. Will goes outside as well, and finds that it's either dusk or dawn, he's not sure which. He wouldn't put it past himself for being asleep for almost an entire day, and time moves differently in the aether. Who knows how much actual time passed while he was fighting the dragon?

He settles in the chair with a wince, sucking in a breath. His coffee mug from that morning is still there. He stares down at it, and idly considers reading the dried and congealed remnants of the coffee, but ultimately discards it. Not as accurate as tea leaves, and he's never been particularly good at fortune telling anyway.

He frowns when he sees Buster digging out in the field. He sighs to himself, rolling his eyes. He tries not to let the dogs dig, in case they mess up one of his boundary markers or sigils. He whistles sharply, and Buster looks up, tail wagging wildly.

Will pushes himself upright, gritting his teeth. His feet are bare and he's wearing the same clothes he was in when he last went into the aether, and the cling of magic is stifling and electric on his clothes. He walks over to where Buster was digging, and finds that it was just past the boundary line.

His frown deepens, and a small tendril of uncertainty rolls around the base of his skull. He crouches down and pushes dirt from the sides of the hole, and finds the head of the dragon staring back at him, clinging to its gem, from the end of his staff.

His staff which should, by all rights, be one thousand miles away inside the charred remains of a dragon's mouth.

Will looks up, his heart in his throat, and carefully digs the rest of his staff free, yanking it out of the ground and back over the boundary line. The dirt is wet and cold on the metal, the gem inside the dragon's mouth still glowing with a faint, gentle light. A pale blue.

Will swallows, and clears his throat. "Come on," he orders Buster sharply, and clicks his tongue to summon the rest of the dogs back inside. He thinks, as the dogs are all herded in and Will's feet touch the comparatively warm floor on the inside of his house, he feels eyes on the back of his neck.

He closes and bolts the door with a growl. Beverly's I.V. bag is empty, so he unhooks it and sets it on his desk. He brings the staff back up to the trunk and puts it inside, along with the iron poker and his crystals, salt, and the leather bag that was still wrapped around his neck.

He leaves the gun out. Just in case.

Will wakes in the middle of the night. A quick glance to his side tells him that every dog is standing, at attention, their eyes on the door. None of them are growling, but then again, they didn't growl last time either.

After all, they know better than to harass magical creatures.

Will slides his hand under his pillow and pulls his gun, the weight of it reassuring him that it's loaded. He rolls to his stomach, pretending to merely be stirring in his sleep, cracks his eyes open and stares towards the door.

A shadow moves beyond the window, behind the door, and Will recognizes the soft ethereal blue of the dragon's eyes. A rumble shakes the ground and Will tightens his grip on his gun. How the Hell

did the beast cross his boundary line? He didn't feel any of the seals breaking, and it's only supposed to part for the people Will allows it to.

The dragon rumbles again, and Will hears the door creak, the porch groan under its weight. The windows fog with the heat of its breath, obscuring Will's view of the outside completely. Will pushes himself upright and breathes in deeply, and rushes up the stairs so that he can get a good sightline to shoot.

When he gets to the window of his bedroom, he realizes that the air, the tree line, and the sky are not as they should be. That is, they're not what the mortal coil projects them to be. Both the night-cat's eyes are wide in the sky, and the trees glisten with purple and black hues, not the normal green. The grass shivers and drips silver dew.

Will frowns, not understanding, even though he knows he should have understood – creatures must show their true forms in the aether. Only humans have the ability of looking human. If he's seeing a dragon, Will is sure it's because the beast doesn't have a choice.

But Will's house and Will's dogs and Will himself should not be in the aether without his permission. Which means the dragon brought them here. Which means there is no boundary mark, and Will is not safe, and the dragon is *alive* and found him and is capable of moving physical things into and out of the aether, and -.

The beast's tail twitches like an agitated cat, and it pulls back, and Will finds himself face to face with its large, pale eyes. It snarls at him, and on the inside of its mouth Will can see where his magic charred and ruined the flesh, blackening it and burning it to a crisp.

He swallows. His fingers tighten around the gun. "I have no fight with you," he says.

The dragon, to his surprise, stops snarling. It blinks at him, and rumbles again. Will's eyes fall to its wings, which curl up beneath the crease of its legs like a child tucking their hands under their knees. Its tail wraps around its sharp talons.

Will's brow creases. He slackens his grip on his gun, just a little. The dragon's mouth is open, panting, and Will winces again as he sees the mangled insides of its throat. Dragons are made to withstand fire, not an outright explosion.

"I'm sorry," he tells the beast. The dragon's nostril's flare, membranes around its head ruffling, tail twitching lightly. Will's eyes fall, to the hollow in the dragon's chest. Will's magic didn't do the dragon any favors; there are scales missing all down the length of its neck, blasted off like shingles from a roof during a hurricane, and the wound at the base of its neck has fresh blood smeared along it. Will feels it like a blow to his own chest.

He did that. *God*, he did that.

"I can heal you," he tells the dragon, meeting its eyes. "If you promise not to eat me."

The dragon seems to give this very thorough consideration, blinking slowly at Will. Then, it dips its head and gives another rumble, and Will nods back. "Hang on," he murmurs, and leaves the window. Beverly said she had left some things in his fridge, and when he opens it, he finds that apparently that means glass bottles of cloudy blue mixtures. There are three of them, and Beverly, as usual, left no instructions on what they actually do, how often to take them, or even if they're meant to be ingested or rubbed into his skin or whatever else.

But he figures he can't do anything worse to the dragon than he already has.

He takes one of the bottles and unscrews the top, sniffing at it cautiously. It smells like mint and basil and just a little like the scent Will associates with rainwater on the aether's grass, which is a little more metallic and clings to the inside of his nose.

He tucks the gun into the back of his jeans, just in case, and walks back to the front of the house. The dogs are still staring at the door, utterly still. Will isn't sure he'll be able to convince them to calm down – he's not even sure what the aether feels like to them – so he doesn't bother. He hopes he can convince the dragon to put them back when he's done.

He walks outside, and looks up when the dragon peers down at him. It sits like a proud bird, a vulture, claws flexing on the joints of its wings. Will walks down the porch, bare feet tickled by the grass, and comes to a stop just shy of the beast's shadow.

He holds out his hand. "Come on," he murmurs.

The dragon eyes him, membranes around its head ruffling in either distrust or nerves. But it lowers its head. Its skull along is as large as Will's torso, horns jutting over two feet above his head. Will touches the dragon's muzzle gently, the thick upper lip covered with a fine layer of scales so delicate and soft they feel like human skin.

"You going to burn me?" Will asks, and grins when the dragon snorts. "Alright. Open up."

The dragon does, and Will bends down so he can peer into its mouth. The heat is almost unbearable and he's glad, at least, that there's no smell of meat to deal with. At least not food – the dragon's throat is badly burned, and it reminds Will of when his dad would overcook burgers on the grill or the time the neighbors down the street got caught in a housefire.

He swallows, and pours Beverly's mixture onto his palm. "Sorry in advance if this hurts," he tells the beast. "Just don't bite me, alright?"

The dragon rumbles, and settles, its wings resting on the ground. Will holds his breath and pushes his wet hand into the dragon's mouth, rubbing the mixture over the dragon's charred throat and the torn open valve at the back that controls its gas intake. The heat inside the dragon's mouth is stifling and is like standing far too close to a fire. Will is sweating, gritting his teeth. He pulls his hand back and coats it again, reaching back in so he can make sure every inch of flesh he damaged is covered by the healing ointment.

He pulls his hand back again, and pours more onto his fingers. He taps the dragon's chin and rubs his hand at the hinge of its jaw where he shoved his staff the first time. Then, down the dragon's neck, finding each place where there are damaged scales. He rubs the mixture into each small depression he finds, until, finally, he reaches the open wound where the dragon's fire stone should be.

The beast rumbles in warning, and Will looks up, to find it watching him with a single unblinking eye. "This will help," he murmurs. The dragon shows its teeth, even when Will pours the last of the bottle over his hand and covers the open wound in the dragon's chest. He doesn't push his fingers inside, just rubs the torn muscle where the stone should be.

The dragon's wings twitch, but he doesn't get his head bitten off or his body torn to shreds, so he considers it a win.

Will smiles, and sets the bottle down. "You got me good too, if it's any consolation," he tells the dragon, walking back up to the porch. Its eyes follow him, and Will turns around and sits on the top step. It prowls forward, on its feet and the arch of its wings, head low and outstretched like a curious cat.

The dragon's nostrils flare, and it straightens.

Will stares up at him. "So…are we even?" he asks. The dragon blinks. "I didn't do…that." He looks down, upper lip curling back in distaste as he sees the dragon's wound. "So, you know, you take a bite outta me, I burn the shit out of you. You put my house back and we call it good?"

The dragon merely stares back.

Will huffs, annoyed. He supposes he shouldn't be surprised. Dragons, and magical creatures and familiars as a whole, don't really talk to people who aren't their witch, mage, wizard, what have you. They communicate with each other and with their bonded magic user, occasionally a traveler like Will if he offers them something in return, and that's about it. Will doesn't have a familiar so he can't even get something to translate for the dragon, and -.

Thank you, Will.

Will blinks, and looks up.

The dragon is still staring at him, unmoving.

The voice was low, quiet. Not what Will expected. If it did, in fact, come from the dragon in front of him.

He clears his throat, and says, very eloquently, "Um."

The dragon smiles at him, baring its sharp teeth. It doesn't otherwise move, and Will is starting to find it unnerving.

"You're welcome," he finally manages. He looks down, then up again. The very tip of the dragon's tail flicks upwards, the rumble it lets out sounds pleased. "And your name is…?"

The dragon laughs, low and throaty, jaws parted to allow the expulsion of air. It settles, content as can be, in front of Will, and drapes its body and wings out along the ground, closer in posture to a swan than a vulture now. *You may call me 'Hannibal',* it says.

Will can't help smiling, hearing the careful rephrasing of the question. Of course: never give the Fey your name.

"Hannibal," he repeats, and the dragon inclines its – his, Will is pretty sure that's a male name, though assigning gender to creatures of the aether is like trying to play Jenga with Scrabble tiles – head, blinking again at Will. "You already know my name."

Yes, Hannibal says with another smile. *You are well-known, to my kind.*

Will frowns, and looks up at Hannibal. He senses, that if he were to ask, the dragon wouldn't give him a straight answer. So instead he nods to Hannibal's chest. "Who did that to you?"

Hannibal rumbles in discontent, wings curling defensively as though trying to hide the vulnerable wound.

"I can help you find them," Will adds.

Do you think I need your help? Hannibal's tone is not defensive. He sounds more curious than anything else.

"Well you didn't crawl into my backyard on a whim," Will replies. Hannibal doesn't answer. "Did you?"

And if I did?

"What are you curious about?"

Hannibal's tail flexes in agitation. It reminds Will of Jimmy and Brian when they get each other all riled up in the lab. Will rolls his eyes. "Fine, don't tell me," he mutters, and stands, dusting himself off. "Now put my house back."

Hannibal makes a noise that rings petulantly in Will's ears.

"Hannibal," Will says flatly. He doesn't have his staff and if Hannibal were to bite him there isn't shit he could do about it, but he senses that they have come, at least temporarily, to a truce.

Hannibal's wings flex, spines stretching like fingers on a hand. *...I do need your help*, he finally murmurs, and looks at Will. *And I will put your house back if you agree to help me*.

Will frowns. "You could have just asked," he mutters.

Could I have? Hannibal challenges.

Will opens his mouth. Closes it. Huffs, and folds his arms across his chest. "What do you need help with?" he asks.

Hannibal blinks at him. *I'm given to understand that you are good at finding things*, he says. Will nods, frowning. *As you've no doubt realized, I've had my stone taken from me. It was…rather violent, and uncomfortable.*

An understatement, Will is sure.

I traced the magic of the witch who did it and that is how I found you. Obviously, I was mistaken. But I know who you are, and if you can help me find the person who attacked me, and help me get my revenge, then I will return your home and your pets and yourself to the mortal coil.

Will looks up at him. "That's it?" he asks.

Were you expecting some grand adventure? Hannibal replies.

"Well…." Will trails off, biting his lower lip. He sighs. "Alright. Fine. Do you have any leads?"

Hannibal blinks at him. *I have a name*, he says.

"Great. You'll tell me it after you put my house back. I can't search for shit in the aether."

Hannibal grumbles, shifting in discomfort. His mouth twists, showing his shining teeth, in something close to a grimace if he had a more human shape. *I find a human shape uncomfortable*, he confesses. Will frowns at him, and then his expression smooths in understanding. Creatures can cast a glamor when in the mortal coil, the same way Will might choose to remain a human shape, or as something monstrous, in the aether. Hannibal can't exactly wander around as a dragon, even if the magic-using community isn't as secretive, the mortals not as ignorant, as they used to be. People might talk.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly, and Hannibal blinks at him. "I just -. I really can't search here. It's too dangerous."

Hannibal considers him, and his wings flutter. He almost looks nervous. *Do you think I won't protect you?*

Will frowns. "Would you?"

Of course, Hannibal replies. *You're my mage.*

Will bites the inside of his cheek, hard. He looks up.

The magic I followed after I lost my stone led me to you, Hannibal tells him. *When you touched me, when I felt your magic in my throat, I realized why.* He rumbles lowly. *I assure you, I was just as surprised as you appear to be. Are you already bonded?*

"No," Will rasps.

Hannibal smiles widely at him. *I didn't think so*.

Will doesn't really know what to do with that. The idea of having a familiar is something he resolved not to linger too long on. Most magic users meet and bond with theirs when they're young. Will is far past the point of thinking he would find one.

And a *dragon*, no less. Dragons are powerful, *so* powerful. Even now, Will can feel it emanating off of Hannibal like liquid heat, sliding up his arms and into the back of his throat. Dragons are…not evil, that implies intent. Destructive, certainly, when they care to be. Clever, very clever. Cunning. Will wouldn't trust a magic user who has a dragon as their familiar.

Figures.

He breathes in, and nods. "I understand," he murmurs. "Just…put my house back. And I'll be as quick as I can, I promise."

Hannibal dips his head, membranes ruffling in readiness. *Go back inside*, he tells Will. *You will wake within the mortal coil, and I will meet you there.*

Will smiles, and nods. Despite himself, anticipation comes for him like a lunging animal. With Hannibal's power merging with his own, who knows how it will feel, what he'll be able to *do*.

"I have more healing salve for you," Will murmurs. "And you are…welcome, in my home. The wards won't bother you."

Thank you, Will, Hannibal purrs, and Will can feel the dragon already making a home for himself inside Will's skull, as he turns away and heads back into his house. *I will see you soon.*

Chapter End Notes

Art by @outofthecavern on Twitter and Tumblr! Thank you so much darling, he's gorgeous! <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> I got tired of italicizing Hannibal's thoughts/words so he's in speech marks now even though it's all heard internally on Will's end, FYI (:

Being gently pushed back from the aether and into the real world is a Hell of a lot more pleasant than being sent there via magic blast. Still, Will's head aches when he wakes up in his bed, a little disoriented like he's wearing someone else's glasses.

He groans into his pillow and shoves himself to his hands and knees. He takes a deep breath in, and the air is crisp and sharp, and has a scent to it. Not the aether. The air doesn't cling to him like fog, and when he looks out of the front window, there is no shimmer of blackened trees and unnatural shades of teal, glimmering in silver moonlight.

It's daytime, and Will has walked between the world and the aether enough to know when there is only one sun in the sky.

So, Hannibal put him back. Good. Will didn't have any weapons when the beast yanked him into the aether but he's not completely helpless, and while he doesn't want to go nuclear on a dragon twice in as many days, he would have had to if Hannibal got pissy with him.

Hannibal. He'll probably appreciate another dose of medicine. Will very deliberately doesn't linger on the fact that apparently his bonded familiar is a *dragon*. There's no time for that kind of 'I need a moment' reaction. There's a dragon in his front yard, that is big and injured and very noticeable, Will has a job to do, and the rest can wait.

When Will walks out, though, he doesn't see any sign of the beast waiting for him. There are signs he was there, most certainly; deep furrows clawed into the ground, upturned soil, a slight char in the grass from the heat of a giant fire-breathing lizard. Will steps out onto his porch, the bottle of medicine Beverly left him clutched in his hand, and looks around for any sign of Hannibal.

He knows Hannibal said that he didn't like changing shape into a human. Dragons stick out. Maybe he left while Will worked, and he'll come back when Will returns to the aether. For a brief moment, an image of Hannibal hollowing out the ground beneath his house and sitting there like the world's worst Jack in the Box hits him, and he looks down.

Then he rolls his eyes at himself, and heads back inside.

The dogs are watching him with an array of looks ranging to 'This is completely normal' to 'What the fuck'. At least, that's how Will reads them. He doesn't have an answer, so he sets down Beverly's potion in case Hannibal *does* show up, and fills the dogs' bowls with food and water. He doesn't want to let them outside until he gets confirmation of where Hannibal is; he doesn't want to spook them.

He looks outside again, just to be sure. A full-grown dragon isn't the kind of thing one misses, but stranger things have happened. Still, there's nothing, just his old Volvo and tire tracks, and evidence that a dragon was there, but no dragon itself.

…Alright. Well, Will still has a job to do. If he goes back on his word he's sure Hannibal will have no qualms about throwing him, his dogs, and his house back into the aether for good. Dragons are not creatures to trifle with, even when bonded.

Hannibal's fire stone was taken from him. Unbonded or not, that's a royally shitty thing to do to any dragon, and Hannibal is…*his*. Which means whoever did this hurt someone of Will's, and that's enough to piss him off enough to want to act.

He wants to think that it won't be that complicated, except he has no idea where to even begin to start looking, because Hannibal didn't give him the Goddamn name of the person, and without the dragon there, Will has no way of using him as a conduit for the search. With the missing girl, he had a map. If he's going to find Hannibal's fire stone, he needs to know where to look.

He clenches his jaw. Were it not for the marks on the ground and his own sore stomach and head, he might have thought it was all a dream. He's been without a familiar for so long, maybe he's snapped and is finally dreaming about it to cope. It's happened before, he thinks he's heard stories.

But…no, a dream didn't cut him up, or nuke half of Northern Virginia's aetherland. A dream didn't put stitches in his stomach or potions in his fridge. Will clings to that as he walks towards the bedroom he doesn't use except for storage.

He opens the door, and freezes.

There is a dragon in his bedroom.

It's Hannibal, Will recognizes his coloration, shape, and the wide cavity in his chest immediately. He looks different when not in the aether, though. Slightly more solid, like headlights shining on a cloud of fog. His eyes are a darker color than the silvery shade, closer to brown than anything else.

He's also the size of a large dog, but that seems like a small detail compared to the fact that there's a dragon in Will's bedroom.

Hannibal looks up at him, and flicks his tongue. "I thought you didn't like coming to the real world," Will says, and walks towards his chest where he keeps all his loose magical items, along with his gun and staff.

"I said I find the human form uncomfortable," Hannibal replies. Will still isn't used to the feeling of something else inside his skull. Hannibal's presence is unobtrusive, Will barely notices it. It's like feeling for a curtain in the dark at night. It's dark outside the house too, opening the curtain won't do anything, but it's *there* all the same.

Will looks over his shoulder at the beast, who has perched in a delicate statue-like pose, neck arched and wings tucked neatly below his chest, tail curled around his feet. "Humans are bigger than that," Will notes.

Hannibal considers this, head cocked. Then, he says, "I find it difficult to move the way you do. I would give myself away immediately." Will rolls his eyes. Clearly Hannibal doesn't want to look

human. That's fine, Will genuinely doesn't care. He doesn't need Hannibal one shape or another to get his work done.

"I thought you might have abandoned me," he says instead, which he realizes is far worse, and far more vulnerable. He clears his throat, and adds, "Or changed your mind."

He opens the chest without another word. Hannibal doesn't answer him, but if the dragon's mind is that of a curtain in a dark room, there is a sudden gust of wind, exposing the similar darkness outside. It comes with a quiet sense of discomfort and confusion.

"Why would I abandon you?" Hannibal finally asks, when Will has gathered what he hopes to God will work for this spell. Searching for a dragon's stone isn't like searching for a person or a lost pair of keys. Fire stones are magical, they belong to creatures of magic, and it's very often the case that magic doesn't want to be found. That it will bite back.

"I have no idea," Will replies, and leaves the room. He hears Hannibal drop to the finger-like claws on the arches of his wings and crawl after him, tail slithering along the floor. "But trying to understand why a dragon, or any magical creature for that matter, does anything is like trying to explain how vast the ocean is, to a child. It just is."

"Anything can be explained," Hannibal reasons. Then, he smiles widely, showing his sharp fangs. They're much less intimidating, given his reduced size, and Will is glad to see they're not big enough to outright bite him in half anymore. "Even to a child."

Will arches a brow. "Alright then, why don't you *explain* to me why you wouldn't abandon me, and I'll tell you why you're wrong."

Hannibal blinks at him. His eyes, dark and shining with intelligence, sweep around Will's living room. He takes in the unmade bed in the front room, the small and uninviting table by the window, the dust on the piano and floating in the air above the armchair and couch. The piles of dogs and dog beds.

He blinks again, eyelids clicking when they meet. The dogs regard him with a wary air, neither outright aggressive nor welcoming. They'd probably be fine once they figured out how warm Hannibal is, because they're suckers like that.

"You think I will abandon you because everyone has," Hannibal finally says. "Except for your pets. But they left someone, didn't they? Most of them. Which means they're capable of it. But their love and loyalty is easier to earn." Hannibal looks at him. "Less so with dragons."

Will's eyes narrow. "Well," he says tightly, "there you have it."

"I hope you are gracious enough to acknowledge that the bond between a witch and their creature is not one I, or any creature, would take lightly," Hannibal says, showing his teeth again.

Will shakes his head. He doesn't say that taking something lightly and following through on it aren't the same thing. He doesn't ask why it took Hannibal so long, if he was able to sense Will enough to find him even without his stone. He wants to know what the Hell Hannibal meant when he said, 'You are known'.

"I promised to help you find your stone," Will says instead of any of that. "I'm going to need your magic to help me. After that, we can talk about bonding, or whatever."

Hannibal's tail twitches at the very tip; a single sign of displeasure. "Very well."

Will nods. "Alright, good. First things first; did it happen here? Or near here?"

"Yes," Hannibal tells him. "Maryland."

Will frowns. That's close, obviously. Comparing the world to the aether is like a solid ball to a wad of silly putty, able to be reshaped and molded as the traveler wishes. Will could walk the equivalent of Wolf Trap to Tokyo in a matter of minutes if he figured out how to fold the aether just right. The fact that Hannibal was already so close to him is…odd.

He pauses, and regards the dragon with a neutral expression. "What happened?" he asks.

"My stone was stolen," Hannibal replies.

"No, I got that. How?"

Hannibal blinks at him. His weight shifts, tension running through him, making his scales look as though they're shivering. He is very subtly not meeting Will's eyes, just a fraction off them. "It was cut out." Hannibal's voice is barely more than a whisper. "I would rather not talk about it."

"Well, you're going to have to," Will replies. "If there's some asshole doing black market magic trade in my own backyard, I want to know about it."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Bullshit."

Hannibal's eyes narrow.

"A guy willing to cut out a dragon's stone doesn't just let it walk away," Will says.

Hannibal blinks at him, nostrils flaring. Of course, neither smoke nor fire comes out, and that seems to frustrate him more. It feeds into Will like mold, makes his lungs feel oddly stuffed. Hannibal's tail curls slightly again.

"Well?' Will demands, when the dragon says nothing.

"You…are a very suspicious creature," Hannibal says.

Will huffs. "Or maybe I'm just pragmatic."

"Perhaps." Will gets the impression that if Hannibal had the personality or anatomy, he'd be rolling his eyes. His wings shift again. "Have I answered enough of your questions? Will you help me?"

Will sighs. "Take it easy, Hannibal. I was always going to help you."

That seems to confuse and aggravate Hannibal further. Perhaps he's used to getting his way. One doesn't usually go out of their way to piss a dragon off, even those that are bonded to them. Will sighs, and sets the items he gathered from the chest upstairs on his little dining room table.

"I don't think I'm in the wrong with being impatient," Hannibal says curtly, with a small trill at the back of his throat.

Will sighs. He has to remember that they're not really angry at each other. Hannibal clearly harbors no ill will towards him for the fight before, if Will hurt him he doesn't care about that. He's probably impressed by the show of strength, dragons often are. But there's a part of him that has been cut out and Will understands that it must be uncomfortable for him.

"You're not," he says gently, meeting the dragon's eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Don't try to placate me," Hannibal replies with another flick of the tip of his tail. "I have no need for it."

"Come here," Will says, holding out his hand. Hannibal blinks at him, before he crawls forward, curling up beside the table and resting his dark, angular head atop it. Will wants to touch him, and he will need to for this spell to work, but he resists. It takes a lot more effort than he imagined it would to resist. Hannibal stares up at him unblinkingly, his eyes shining like sunlight through amber in the light coming from the window in front of Will's desk.

Will's fingers curl. "I'll need to touch you," he tells Hannibal. "If you're willing to show me your memories, it'll help."

Hannibal continues to eye him for a long moment, before he flicks his tongue out and shifts his weight, as though getting more comfortable. "I would warn you against prying too deeply," he says, his mental voice taking on a playful tone, "but I don't think you are going to heed my advice."

Will frowns, at that, but has nothing to say in disagreement. If convention holds true, they are uniquely suited to each other, and therefore Hannibal would understand the nature of the kind of witch he would attract. The curious, the morbidly fascinated. The kind of man who would kill for the chance to peer into the mind of a dragon.

He says nothing. He merely reaches, his palm flat, and rests it against Hannibal's smooth cheek. Immediately, the dragon begins to purr, his eyes closing halfway. Will is surrounded almost instantly with a feeling of warmth, ash coating the back of his tongue, and feels a sudden, terrible ache in his chest, a pain unlike anything he has felt before.

His fingers curl again, trembling as he rubs the tips of them behind the hinge of Hannibal's jaw. Sweat breaks out below his hairline, under his arms, behind his knees. "It hurts," he whispers.

"Yes," Hannibal says. "It does."

Gods above and below, it hurts. More than Will anticipated. He thought, naively, that Hannibal would want to shield him from the suffering he holds in his own chest, around the chasm of his missing fire stone, but that is not the case. Rather, Hannibal seems to push his pain onto Will eagerly, seeking perhaps to give Will greater motivation to help him, or garner sympathy, Will can't tell.

In the end, it doesn't matter. The pain makes Will's muscles seize up and he can't pull away, so he is helplessly yanked deeper into Hannibal's mind, wading through the creeper vines and cloying smoke of agony and rage clouding Hannibal's consciousness like a shroud. He feels like he's back in the aether, unable to breathe but not necessarily needing to. Still, his lungs burn and his stomach clenches with nausea, a human reaction to pain, to the primal fear of being crushed and devoured by something much more powerful than himself.

From the depths of the darkness extends a hand, human in shape but nothing else. Will reaches for it, fingers lacing, and allows himself to be pulled further, until he knows he's not breathing, until his legs shake and his heart is racing in his chest.

There is a quiet rumble, not so much sound as sensation within the base of his skull and against the soles of his feet. Hannibal, he knows it's the dragon. Another layer of heat wraps around him, but this time it is comforting and surrounds him in a feeling of safety and greatness. This is what the first men felt when they climbed the highest mountain and stared out at the world beyond, knowing that they would conquer it for themselves.

Will gasps and tastes dragon fire. Clenches his fingers, and feels smooth scales and hide beneath his grip. "Hannibal," he whispers, and the darkness shifts against him in answer. In the living world, he is aware that Hannibal has crept closer to him, that the dragon now has a wing wrapped around Will's legs, ready to catch him should he fall, and that Hannibal's tail has delicately wrapped around one ankle to keep him grounded. He reaches, blind, for his familiar, and sighs in relief when Hannibal holds him tighter.

"Open your eyes," Hannibal commands him. Will obeys. Upon his desk there is smoke, now, dancing in vaguely human shapes, surrounding the hulking form of a wounded dragon. The shadow beings themselves are not large, no bigger than mice, but he sees them with perfect clarity as the humanoid ones attack the dragon, again and again, piercing its wings and wrapping ropes around its head so that it cannot fly away.

Outrage, powerful and fierce, rises in the back of his throat like bile.

One of the shapes comes forward, a blade in its hand, and shoves it into the dragon's chest. Hannibal's hoarse scream echoes in Will's head, another wave of fresh pain cutting through the smoke as Hannibal relives his fire stone being cut out. Will watches, as the smoke beings converge on the dragon, keeping him pinned as their leader cuts out his stone, and then removes it completely, holding it aloft like a trophy.

"What are they?" Will whispers, aware through the horror that he should be paying attention. That these creatures holding Hannibal down in memory and mutilating him are not human in shape. "Who is he?" he rasps, harsher, as the smoke that plunged a blade into Hannibal's heart retracts its hands and straightens, holding a beam of light no larger than a small pebble.

It is there that the reenactment ends. Will feels Hannibal's revulsion and pain and resists the urge to simply vomit onto his desk, onto the map that showed him where to find Abigail Hobbs. He clenches the fingers of his free hand, his other one has slid from Hannibal's jaw to the ruffles around the side of his face. The membranes there are velveteen soft, like a cat's ears, not scaley like he had expected.

"Hannibal." There are tears in his eyes, his voice is hoarse as though he had been the one screaming. From the other side of the room, Winston and the rest of his pack are staring at him with solemn, worried eyes.

Will stares back at them, and then at the place on the map where the figures were. He can't help notice that the one who cut out Hannibal's stone was dancing upon the place where Abigail's father has taken her, and hidden her within the aether – still stained with a few droplets of his blood. He cannot help notice that, when the smoke figure held the stone aloft, it looked like it was taunting Will, inviting him to come give chase.

Are they connected? Is that how Hannibal finally found him, through Will's presence in the aether when he was searching for Abigail Hobbs? Will does not believe in coincidence, he knows far too much about the workings of the world and beyond it to know it to be so lazy, but things like fate and destiny – those are powerful forces.

It must have been fate, to finally bring him to a place where his familiar would find him and choose him. It must be destiny, that gave him a *dragon* for a familiar.

Inside his skull, Hannibal's presence is large and soothing, the weight of a warm blanket on a cold winter's night. Now that he has it, Will can't remember how it felt not to have him there. He knows, if he were to prod further, there would be a vast abyss of knowledge and power inside. Of *magic* inside.

He dares not approach, but curiosity and desire burn him from the pit of his stomach like an open flame.

"Will?" Hannibal presses, nudging his muzzle into Will's stomach. Will flinches instinctively, though there is no pain from his wounds there thanks to Beverly's potion.

Beverly. Oh, she is going to lose her entire shit when Will tells her what happened.

"I need to make a few phone calls," Will declares, straightening up. He has been to the aether three times in the last two days, has nuked half of Northern Virginia with a blast of magic, and hasn't slept or eaten aside from when he was passed out, but he feels alive with energy. He feels like he could conquer the world.

That is what a dragon's magic does. Will stares down at his familiar, and wonders.

Hannibal blinks at him a moment later, and withdraws. He looks towards the dogs and huffs quietly.

"You can rest there," Will tells him. "They'll probably appreciate your warmth. They know not to mess with familiars, and they know that…that you're mine."

Hannibal looks at Will, for a long moment that lasts a heartbeat and an age all at once. Then, he bows his head, and slithers to the pile of dog beds. Winston moves first to give him room, and immediately all the dogs plaster themselves under Hannibal's wings and along his flanks. Will smiles when he sees Buster curl up next to Hannibal's chest wound, always the little guardian.

The sight fills him with an overwhelming sense of *rightness*. Of completion. Like Hannibal was always meant to be there, keeping everyone warm and oozing magic until Will feels as strong as he's ever been.

He stares, he can't help himself, until Hannibal fixes him with one shining amber eye. "Phone calls, Will?"

"Right," Will mutters, snapping himself out of his reverie. "Of course. Right."

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